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1964/05/25

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

DRAFT

May 25, 1964

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MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Basic Recommendation and Projected Course of Action
on Southeast Asia

I. Basic Recommendation

1. It is recommended that you make a Presidential decision that the U. S. will use selected and carefully graduated military force against North Vietnam, under the following conditions: (1) after appropriate diplomatic and political warning and preparation, (2) and unless such warning and preparation -- in combination with other efforts -- should produce a sufficient improvement of non-Communist prospects in South Vietnam and in Laos to make military action against North Vietnam unnecessary.

2. This basic Presidential decision is recommended on these premises:

(1) that the U. S. cannot tolerate the loss of Southeast Asia to Communism;

(2) that without a decision to resort to military action if necessary, the present prospect is not hopeful, in South Vietnam or in Laos;

(3) that a decision to use force if necessary, backed by resolute and extensive deployment, and conveyed by every possible means to our adversaries, gives the best present chance of avoiding the actual use of such force.

3. It is further recommended that our clear purpose in this decision should be to use all our influence to bring about a major reduction or elimination of North Vietnamese interference in Laos and in South Vietnam, and not to unroll a scenario aimed at the use of force as an end in itself. We will have further recommendations on the ways of stating U. S. objectives.

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~~TOP SECRET~~

(page 1 of 5 pages)

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4. It is further recommended that in the execution of this decision all separate elements of the problem (political, diplomatic, economic, and military) and all separate geographical elements of it (in Laos, in South Vietnam, in Cambodia, and in North Vietnam itself) should be treated as parts of a single problem: the protection of Southeast Asia from further Communist encroachment.

5. It is the hope and best estimate of most of your advisers that a decision of this kind can be executed without bringing a major military reply from Red China, and still less from the Soviet Union. It is also the prevailing estimate that selective and carefully prepared military action against North Vietnam will not trigger acts of terror and military operations by the Viet Cong which would engulf the Khanh regime. Nevertheless, it is recognized that in making this decision we must accept two risks: (1) the risk of escalation toward major land war or the use of nuclear weapons; (2) the risk of a reply in South Vietnam itself which would lose that country to neutralism and so eventually to Communism.

II. An outline of the proposed sequence of actions

It is our current estimate that the actions which follow should be taken in the order in which they are listed. Especially in the later stages it might well be important to modify the sequence in the light of the development of events. In each major stage, moreover, there would be a number of connected actions. Finally, it must be remembered that the enemy has choices, too, and that this sequence might therefore be truncated or drastically modified by the actions of others.

(1) A Presidential decision as outlined in I. above.

(2) The establishment of communication with Hanoi (through the Canadians) and with other adversaries of major importance (USSR, France, Red China).

The purpose of these communications would be to make very clear both the seriousness of U. S. will and the limited character of U. S. objectives. We intend that Communism shall not take over Southeast Asia, but we do not intend or desire the destruction of the Hanoi regime. If terror and subversion end, major improvement in relations is possible. It is only if they do not end that trouble is coming.

~~TOP SECRET~~

(page 2 of 5 pages)

SENSITIVE

D R A F T

TOP SECRET - SENSITIVE

-3-

(5/25/64)

(3) A Honolulu conference and discussions with Thailand .

This meeting, which might occur early next week, would be directed to the establishment of full understanding with Ambassador Lodge and MACV, and to possible intense consultations with Ambassador Unger and Ambassador Martin from Thailand. At the same time, or just after, we would communicate our basic determination and our opening strategy to the governments of Thailand, Laos and South Vietnam. This Honolulu meeting would imply major decisions also to intensify our efforts in South Vietnam (along lines to be presented in a separate paper).

(4) Action at the UN.

This would probably take a double form:

(a) in the broadest terms, we would present the problem of Communist aggression in Southeast Asia, together with much hitherto secret evidence proving Hanoi's responsibility;

(b) in parliamentary terms, we would probably ask a resolution confined to the Pathet Lao aggression in Laos. It is the current estimate of our UN experts that on a wider resolution involving South Vietnam we might not have the necessary seven votes for affirmative action. The one thing we do not want is to take our basic political case to the UN and fail to muster a majority.

The basic object of this exercise would be a double one:

(a) to give worldwide publicity to the basic problem through the voice of Stevenson, and

(b) to make it perfectly plain if we move to further action that we had done our best at the UN.

(5) A formal announcement by us and by our friends that the requirements of the UN resolution (whether or not it was vetoed) are not being met.

The purpose of this step is to clarify again that we have tried the UN and that it is not our fault that there has been an inadequate response.

TOP SECRET
SENSITIVE

(page 3 of 5 pages)

DRAFT

TOP SECRET - SENSITIVE

-4-

(5/25/64)

(6) Consultation of SEATO allies.

We believe this should take place both by a meeting of the SEATO Council in Bangkok and by more intense consultations in the capitals of the more energetic members of SEATO, notably Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, The Philippines, and Thailand. We do not expect Pak or French support. The object would be to obtain basic agreement on the next steps toward action and commitment of forces at as high a level as possible.

(7) The first deployments toward Southeast Asia of U. S. and, hopefully, allied forces.

It is our recommendation that these deployments be on a very large scale, from the beginning, so as to maximize their deterrent impact and their menace. We repeat our view that a pound of threat is worth an ounce of action -- as long as we are not bluffing.

(8) A Congressional Resolution.

We agree that no such resolution should be sought until Civil Rights is off the Senate calendar, and we believe that the preceding stages can be conducted in such a way as to leave a free choice on the timing of such a resolution. Some of us recommend that we aim at presenting and passing the resolution between the passage of Civil Rights and the convening of the Republican Convention. Others believe that delay may be to our advantage and that we could as well handle the matter later in the summer, in spite of domestic politics.

(9) A further and expanded deployment of military force toward the theater.

The object of this continuing deployment, after the passage of the resolution, is to give still more time for threat to do the work of action.

(10) Initial strike against the north.

This would be very carefully designed to have more deterrent than destructive impact, as far as possible. This action

TOP SECRET (page 4 of 5 pages)

SENSITIVE

~~DRAFT~~

-5-

(5/25/64)

~~TOP SECRET~~ - SENSITIVE

would be accompanied by the simultaneous withdrawal of U. S. dependents from South Vietnam and by active diplomatic offensives in the Security Council, or in a Geneva Conference, or both, aimed at restoring the peace throughout the area. This peace-keeping theme will have been at the center of the whole enterprise from the beginning.

McG. B.

~~TOP SECRET~~

(page 5 of 5 pages)

SENSITIVE